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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the use of the electronic mail capability of Special Net (an online database) as a data collection instrument. A series of seven questions relating to adult education for the handicapped personnel preparation programs was posted to Special Net users. Five of 40 users responded to the question on-line. A followup questionnaire examined reasons for nonresponse and the prime reason identified was that the message was not received. Use of the online database as a research tool was found to provide extremely short turnaround time between posting the request and receiving responses. Findings of the survey itself included that adult education for the handicapped was not available on 80% of the campuses. (CL)

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AN ELECTRONIC SURVEY OF ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMS FOR THE HANDICAPPED

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There has been a rapid development of online databases in education in recent years. The Guide to Outline Databases (1983) lists thirty-seven separate databases specifically devoted to education. Many online databases include an electronic mail function. One such database in education is Special Net. The electronic mail function of Special Net can be used as a confidential data collection instrument by scholars interested in survey research.

Online Study

A study conducted at the University of Alabama between April and September 1984 investigated the use of the electronic mail capability of Special Net as a data collection instrument. A series of seven questions relating to Adult Education for the Handicapped personnel preparation programs was posted to Special Net users. Forty users included on the "Colleges/Univ." list maintained on Special Net received the questions. The seven questions were as follows;

1. Does your institution have a personnel preparation program in special education?
2. Does your institution have a personnel preparation program in adult education?
3. Does your institution have a personnel preparation program in adult education for the handicapped?
4. Does your adult education program for the handicapped include one or more separate courses relating directly to the adult handicapped?
5. Does your adult education program for the handicapped include information relating directly to the adult handicapped infused into general adult education courses?
6. Is your adult education program for the handicapped administered separate from your program in special education?
7. Is your adult education program for the handicapped accessable to and usable by handicapped individuals?

Five users responded to the question online. A compilation of their responses is contained in Table 1.

COMPILATION OF ONLINE RESPONSES TO SURVEY

Question	No. of Respondents		Percentage of Respondents		Percentage of Messages Sent	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
1	5	0	100	0	12.5	0
2	1	4	20	80	2.5	10
3	1	4	20	80	2.5	10
4	1	0	20	0	2.5	0
5	0	1	0	20	0	2.5
6	0	1	0	20	0	2.5
7	1	0	20	0		0

(Table 1)

All responses were posted within thirteen days of receipt of the message. Four of the five responses were received within ninety-six hours from the time the message was posted. A period of ninety days was allowed for further response. Following the expiration of the ninety day online response time limit, which had been determined in advance, a printed follow-up mail out was sent to the non-respondents.

Mail Follow-up

A follow-up questionnaire was mailed to thirty (30) nonrespondents. The questionnaire asked for reasons for nonresponse. Eight reasons were suggested.

They included: 1. Didn't receive message; 2. Message not addressed to proper person; 3. Topic of no concern to us; 4. Uncertain about response method; 5. No program in area covered by survey; 6. Computers have been down; 7. Special Net not being utilized here; 8. Other. A compilation of the responses to the mail out is included in Table 2.

COMPILATION OF FOLLOW-UP ON ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR THE HANDICAPPED SURVEY

Questions	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Didn't receive message.	6	37.5 %
Message not addressed to proper person.	2	12.5 %
Topic of no concern to us.	0	0
Uncertain about response method.	0	0
No program in area covered by survey.	3	18.7 %
Computers have been down.	1	6.25%
Special Net not being utilized here.	1	6.25%
Other (Specify).	3	18.7 %
	16	100.0 %

(Table 2)

Sixteen responses were received from the follow-up survey. These respondents came from all sections of the country and from nine different states (i.e., Arizona, Florida, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada and Pennsylvania).

The reason for nonresponse to the questionnaire which was given by the greatest number (37.5%) was this: the message was not received. Two (12.5%) responses indicated that the message was not addressed to the proper person while three (18.7%) gave as the reason: no program in the area was covered by the survey. One (6.25%) gave as the reason for no response: computers have been down and Special Net was not used at their institution. Other reasons given by respondents (18.7%) included the following: 1. The usage of Special Net declined to the point that significant amounts of material of interest could not be found. Also, getting phone lines proved to be a problem and funds were too limited to allow for a direct line. 2. The person who was to receive the message was not longer at the institution and no one had been designated to reply. 3. Little knowledge or information in the area of Special Net usage and adult education for the handicapped was available;therefore, the respondent saw no need to answer the online study.

Discussion

This study provides information on two topics. The first concerns the use of an online database as a research tool. The second relates to the results obtained from the survey itself.

The successful collection of data by means of an electronic mail system has been demonstrated. Although the number of respondents was not large, those who responded provided the data requested. Turn-around-time between posting the request and receiving responses was extremely short as compared to traditional

methods. The major problems associated with obtaining meaningful responses to the survey questions are not due to electronic system. They are due to such traditional problems as accurately identifying the appropriate target audience, and topic interest.

The findings of the survey itself provide some useful insights into the current status of Adult Education for the Handicapped personnel preparation programs. Eighty percent of the respondents indicated no such program was available on their campus. This could be a reflection of lack of specificity in identifying the appropriate target audience. It may also be an accurate reflection of the state of the field at this time. These findings must be considered as preliminary information leading to a more extensive survey which would include Special Net users and non-Special Net users alike.